

EXHIBIT 3

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

I Love Facebook. That's Why I'm Suing Meta.

May 5, 2024



Emma Erickson

[Share full article](#) 292

By Ethan Zuckerman

Mr. Zuckerman is an associate professor of public policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is the director of the UMass Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure.

While it's become fashionable to dump on the aging social media platform Facebook, I quite enjoy using it. Many of my high school and college friends use it to celebrate birthdays and share news of their children and their travels. Eight years ago, I reconnected with

a college housemate on the platform, and last year we got married. Thanks, Facebook.

But like many people, I wish I had more control over how Facebook delivers my friends' updates to me. Facebook's inscrutable feed algorithm, which is supposed to calculate which content is most likely to appeal to me and then send it my way, forgets friends I want to hear from, becomes obsessed with people to whom I'm only loosely connected and generally feels like an obstacle to how I'd like to connect with my friends.

When the British software developer Louis Barclay developed a software workaround to address this problem, I was intrigued. Mr. Barclay's tool — a piece of software known as an extension, which can be installed in a Chrome web browser — was simple. Christened Unfollow Everything, it would automate the process of unfollowing each of my 1,800 friends, a task that manually would take hours. The result is that I would be able to experience Facebook as it once was, when it contained profiles of my friends, but without the endless updates, photos, videos and the like that Facebook's algorithm generates. I could curate my feed by following only those friends and groups I really still want to see updates from.

As nice as this tool would be for me, I saw in it a bigger purpose: If tools like Unfollow Everything were allowed to flourish, and we could have better control over what we see on social media, these tools might create a more civic-minded internet.

ADVERTISEMENT

There are many serious concerns about what social media is doing to us individually, and to society. Congress has passed or proposed sweeping measures, from [forcing a sale of TikTok](#) to asking platforms to ensure young users aren't harmed by the content they experience online. These broad measures do violence to freedom of expression, and they may put even more control over what we read and view in the hands of these powerful companies. If a court finds that users have a right to choose what they experience on social media, a new path forward is possible: We can decide how social

media works for us and for our children through tools we can control.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Unfortunately, Mr. Barclay was forced by Facebook to remove the software. Large social media platforms appear to be increasingly resistant to third-party tools that give users more command over their experiences. Many of them, in fact, have stopped supporting third-party tools directly.

In 2023, Reddit and Twitter effectively prevented developers from using the companies' data portals by imposing a pricing change that makes such tools impractically expensive. Some companies go even further by threatening developers who release their tools independently. In 2021, the developer of [Swipe](#) for Facebook, an Android app intended to provide a streamlined Facebook experience, said that the platform sent him a cease and desist letter, leading him to remove the product from the Google Play store. Another app, Simple Social, was also removed from Google's store. Platforms like Facebook no doubt are concerned that these third-party apps could block ads or sponsored content, and may also be worried about losing valuable users.

After talking with Mr. Barclay, I decided to develop a new version of Unfollow Everything. And rather than wait to see whether Meta, Facebook's parent, would take legal action against me, I — and the lawyers at the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia — [asked a federal court](#) in California last week to rule on whether users should have a right to use tools like Unfollow Everything that give them increased power over how they use social networks, particularly over algorithms that have been engineered to keep users scrolling on their sites. (Meta declined to comment for this article.)

The Stanford University scholar Francis Fukuyama and his colleagues refer to such tools as “middleware.” They make the point that a competitive market for these tools could be a more fine-grained way to improve social media than big-footed regulatory approaches. They also wrote that Congress would probably need to take action to require platforms to be more receptive to this sort of software.

ADVERTISEMENT

My lab at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is dedicated to creating user-empowering middleware to forge a future where you could choose to read Facebook through a filter that de-emphasized divisive political arguments and emphasized personal updates, or to read X through a filter that checked news headlines to see if they came from reliable journalistic outlets. Our goal is to let users pick the algorithms that filter out the content they don't want to see and select content that interests them, rather than giving this power to platforms like Facebook.

Such tools are protected under Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which safeguards platforms like Facebook from direct liability for the behavior of their users and has been critical in allowing Facebook and others to build billion dollar businesses. But the remainder of the section often goes ignored. We argue that it establishes the rights of users, families and schools to self-police the content they encounter online, using technical means to block material they find objectionable. This protection should encompass tools like Unfollow Everything by anticipating the needs of users to assert control when the interests of content providers are not aligned with the interests of users.

Should the court in California rule in our favor, my lab will release Unfollow Everything 2.0 at no charge, and users will have the chance to participate in a study to examine whether their use of Facebook changes with the tool and whether they feel in more command of their experience.

A healthy internet is a balance between the intentions of the powerful companies that run it and the individuals who use it. Giving users more control is important to establishing more of an equilibrium in an online world that is increasingly out of kilter.

More on Facebook



Opinion | Isabel Slone
Facebook Is a Freak Show Ghost Town, and I'm Loving It
Nov. 19, 2022



Opinion | Farhad Manjoo
I Was Wrong About Facebook

July 21, 2022



Video
The Day Facebook Ruined the Internet

June 9, 2021

[Ethan Zuckerman](#) is an associate professor of public policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is the director of the UMass Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure. He is the author of “Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them.”

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

*Follow the New York Times Opinion section
on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), [WhatsApp](#), [X](#) and [Threads](#).*

A version of this article appears in print on May 6, 2024, Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: I Love Facebook. That's Why I'm Suing Meta.. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)